

Wealth and Sacrifice in Early Christianity: Revisiting Mark's Presentation of Jesus' Encounter with the Rich Young Ruler

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I have always been rather troubled by both popular and serious treatments of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17–22. Our interpretations of this challenging text appear to be strongly influenced by our own theological traditions and the social world in which we live, rather than by a sensitivity to ancient Mediterranean economic and cultural realities, and to the narrative context of the passage itself.

The pericope begins with a man falling before Jesus and asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). W. Wessel suggests that

[The rich man] was thinking in terms of Jewish works of righteousness. He wanted to *do* something to merit eternal life, whereas Jesus taught that eternal life (the kingdom of God) is a gift to be received (cf. v. 15).¹

The dialogue which follows, however, points in a different direction entirely. Jesus responds to the rich young ruler (hereafter, RYR) with six socio-ethical commandments from the Decalogue. Then he confronts the man with a challenge which finds no parallel in the Hebrew Scriptures.² Nowhere does Mark 10:17–31 even hint that Jesus had a problem with the RYR's desire to *do* something to inherit eternal life.³

TrinJ 21:2 (Fall 2000) p. 144

C. E. B. Cranfield seeks to resolve the conflict between Jesus' command and the doctrine of justification by faith as follows:

[Mark 10:21] does not mean that selling one's goods and giving the proceeds to the poor is a meritorious act that will *earn* treasure in heaven; for the reward is God's undeserved gift to those who are willing to receive it. But trust, willingness to accept God's gift as a gift, cannot help but show itself by outward tokens. Jesus by commanding the man to show the tokens which are the outward expression of faith is really appealing to him to have faith.⁴

Such a reading finds no direct support in the passage under consideration. One ...

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